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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the effect of dialogue journal writing on English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) students' speaking skills. Subjects were 136 students enrolled in a history program at an Egyptian university, divided randomly into experimental and control groups. The experimental group received training in dialogue journal writing in addition to classroom English language instruction; the control group received only the language instruction. All students were pre and posttested on English speech skills. Results indicate that the groups scored about equally on the pretest, but the experimental group scored significantly higher on the posttest, suggesting the journal-writing training helped improve speech skills. Topics for further research are recommended. (Contains 37 references.) (Author/MSE)

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Effect of dialogue journal writing on EFL students' speaking skill

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of dialogue journal writing on EFL students' speaking skill. The subjects for the study comprised the entire population (n=136) of the department of history at the Faculty of Arts, Menoufia University, Egypt. This sample was randomly divided into two equal groups, forming both the experimental and the control groups. The experimental group received training in dialogue journal writing in addition to t prescribed book. The control group was taught the same prescribed book for the same period of time, but did not receive any training in dialogue journal writing. Statistical analysis of the obtained data revealed a significant difference between the experimental group and the control group on the posttest in favor of the former group. These results were discussed and recommendations for future research were suggested.

Statement of the problem

The problem of the study was to determine the effect of dialogue journal writing on EFL students' speaking skill.

Significance of the study

English nowadays is no longer the language which Egyptians use for only reading and writing to pass examinations or to write dissertations. On the contrary, with the present open policy, Egyptians frequently find themselves face to face with foreigners. Therefore, speaking English as a foreign language has become a vital skill for them. In spite of this fact, speaking is still neglected if not totally forgotten in Egyptian schools and universities. In part this occurs because reading and writing are the only skills needed for formal testing. In support of this information, Kellaghan and Greaney (1992) found that skills ignored in national examinations are neglected in teaching and learning. And in part it occurs because Egyptian classrooms are too crowded with students and each student has no time to speak. The significance of this study lies in the fact that it tries to find a new method for developing the speaking skill through writing, which is overemphasized in EFL classrooms in Egypt.

Theoretical background to the study

A number of language theoreticians assume that speaking and writing develop reciprocally and directly affect each other (e.g. Myers 1987). One reason for this assumption, as Shuy (1981) argues, is that both oral and written language come from the same source which is one's communicative competence. A second reason is that writing and speaking are productive modes of the language arts and employ many of the same faculties (Larson and Jones 1983). A third reason, as Magnan (1985: 117) notes, is that ". . . writing is sometimes the only possible form for 'speech' . . . [and] speech is the most feasible form for 'writing'." A final reason is that writing involves talking to oneself which is considered one of the characteristics of effective speakers (Klein 1977).

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In line with the previously-mentioned assumption, some language theoreticians assert that the dialogue journal writing has the qualities of spoken conversation. The following excerpts indicate this point of view:

> Dialogue writing allows writers to use the full range of available language functions, or "speech actions." Complaints, questions, promises, challenges, directions, are all part of dialogue writing. The direct, functional nature of this writing sets it apart from the usual modes of written discourse we are familiar with. Language uses not commonly allowed to students in classrooms (or in many professional or consultative interactions), such as personal opinions, direct evaluations of lessons ("Math was pretty good today.") and negative as well as positive feelings are freely expressed in the journal. (Staton 1988a: 4)

> . . . dialogue writing, in which two participants write back and forth, "conversing" in writing, incorporates the interactive aspects of oral, face-to-face communication and the solitary, self-directed aspects of essayist writing. (Kreeft 1984: 141)

> The dialogue writing . . . has a great deal in common with spoken conversation. It opens a door for the use of a wide range of language functions, whereas essays, letters, and other types of school writing are, by definition, limited to a narrower range. It is developmentally appropriate for the application of what is known about how to use oral language in a written form. In short, the use of dialogue-journal creates the necessary conditions which are true for the development of any language skill, oral or written. (Shuy 1988: 87)

Research literature

The research literature in this study was reviewed with respect to exploring the similarities and differences between speaking and writing since there is no research examining the effect of writing on speaking. In this respect, a large number of studies view speaking and writing as similar forms (e.g. Cooper 1982, Mangelsdorf 1989, Negm 1995). Other studies conducted by Hildyard and Hidi (1985), Mazzie (1987) and Redeker (1984) point to the differences between speaking and writing. But these differences, as Shuy (1988: 77) argues, "are largely the product of comparing formal writing with informal speech . . . [and] are considerably less obvious when one compares formal speech to formal writing."

In light of the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed above, it seems likely that training in dialogue journal writing will improve EFL students' speaking skill.

Method

Sample

The total sample for the study was 136 1st year EFL students enrolled in the department of history at the Faculty of Arts, Menoufia University, Egypt. This sample was randomly divided into two equal groups, forming both the experimental and the control groups.

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Research hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

1. On a test of speaking proficiency, there would be no statistically significant difference in the mean scores between the experimental group and the control group prior to the start of the study.
2. On a test of speaking proficiency, there would be a statistically significant difference between the group which received training in dialogue journal writing and the control group.

Research variables

The **independent** variable for the study was the dialogue journal writing, in which students wrote weekly on any topic, and the teacher wrote back to each student–making comments and offering opinions, requesting and giving clarification, asking and answering questions (Peyton and Reed 1990).

The **dependent** variable was EFL students' speaking skill as measured by an experimenter-designed test of speaking proficiency.

Instrument

Following an examination of the question types used in the FSI and TSE tests, the researcher developed a test of speaking proficiency. This test consisted of 5 sections. In the first section, the examinee read aloud a printed passage (of approximately 110 words) and was told that scoring would be based on pronunciation. In the second section, the examinee was presented with ten partial sentences and was asked to complete each sentence orally (e.g. ". . ." he said angrily). The third section consisted of a series of five pictures and the examinee was asked to tell the story which these pictures illustrate. Section four consisted of ten spoken questions intended to elicit free and somewhat lengthy responses from the examinee (e.g. What do you do on vacations?). In the fifth and final section, the examinee saw a television schedule and was asked to describe it aloud.

Prior to using the test, its validity was established by five university teachers, who reviewed the test items regarding their suitability for measuring the spoken English of EFL students at the intermediate level. Furthermore, the test reliability was assessed by administering the test to a pilot group (n= 30) and calculating the coefficient alpha for each section. The results indicated that the coefficient alpha for the first section was 0.86, for the second section was 0.84, for the third section was 0.81, for the fourth section was 0.83, and for the fifth section was 0.80. These coefficients alphas indicated that the overall instrument is internally consistent.

Test administration

All testing was done in the language laboratory where each subject could work in an individual booth in relative isolation from other subjects. In order to minimize possible distractions, no more than five students were tested during a single session. At the beginning of each session, the experimenter was sure that all students could properly manipulate the recording equipment.

Scoring

Following the criteria included in the TSE scoring manual, the examinees' answer tapes were scored by two raters (working independently). Answer tapes with scores that differed by six points or more were rated by a third independent rater. The score for each

answer tape was the average of two ratings, either the first two ratings, or, in case in which a third rater was required, the average of the third rating and the closest score.

Prior to scoring, the three raters were trained in using the TSE scoring key at two workshops conducted by the researcher. Then, ten answer tapes not included in the study were scored for the purpose of conducting interrater reliability. The obtained correlation coefficients were: 0.84 between raters #1 and #2, 0.89 between raters #1 and #3, and 0.85 between raters #2 and #3. These coefficients indicate a high interrater reliability among the three raters.

Procedures

At the beginning of the study, the two groups were pretested during the subjects' free time. Following pretesting and throughout the 1996/97 academic year, the experimental group received training in dialogue journal writing in addition to the prescribed book, *Selections for Developing English Language Skills, Part 1*, by M. El-Koumy and H. El-Daly (1995).The control group was taught the same prescribed book for the same period of time, but did not receive any training in dialogue journal writing. Both the experimental and the control groups were taught by the researcher. The study lasted for six months, starting September 26, and ending March 24. After the six month treatment period was over, both the experimental and the control groups were posttested. Finally, the data gathered via the pre- and posttests were statistically analyzed using the t-test.

Results and discussion

Pretest results

Table 1
The difference in the mean scores between the experimental group and the control group on the pretest

Group	N	M	S. D.	t-value
Experimental	68	106.18	28.19	0.13
Control	68	105.57	27.78	

Maximum score = 309

As shown in Table 1, there was no statistically significant difference in the mean scores between the experimental group and the control group on the pretest (t= 0.13; p= n. s.). Therefore, the first hypothesis was accepted. This suggests that students in the two groups were fairly equivalent in their speaking skill at the beginning of the study. This result may be due to the neglect of speaking in all Egyptian schools because of the reasons mentioned before.

Posttest results

Table 2
The difference in the mean scores between the experimental group and the control group on the posttest

Group	N	M	S. D.	t-value
Experimental	68	130.60	29.21	3.93
Control	68	109.25	33.90	

Maximum score = 309

As shown in Table 2, the posttest results indicated that the experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group ($t = 3.93$; $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the second hypothesis was accepted. There are many possible explanations for the beneficial effects of the dialogue journal writing in this study. One explanation could be the establishment of student-teacher rapport which might motivate students to learn more about communication (Peyton 1988, Porter et al. 1990). A second possible explanation is that in dialogue journal writing students had the opportunity to express themselves openly and in private without being embarrassed about the nature of their concerns or the limits of their language. A third explanation is that dialogue journal writing might make students better thinkers through the elaboration of their own thoughts, which could in turn improve their speaking skill. In support of this information, Scardamalia and Bereiter (1985: 307) note that "Writing more than conversation seems to force a critical analysis of our own thoughts." A fourth explanation is that dialogue journal writing increases the opportunities for interaction between the students and the teacher and extends communication beyond the usual limits of the classroom (Peyton and Reed 1990). A fifth explanation is that dialogue journals individualize language learning which could in turn improve the communicative competence of low-ability students. A final explanation is that "In written dialogue journal interaction, just as in oral face-to-face spoken interaction, a number of discourse types can occur, each with its own interactional structure." (Peyton 1988: 183)

Recommendations for future research

The following directions for future research are suggested by the study: (1) Analyzing language uses in dialogue journal texts. (2) Exploring the effect of dialogue journal writing on students' speaking skill at different stages of language development. (3) Exploring the effect of oral reading versus dialogue journal writing on students' speaking skill. (4) Exploring the effect of oral dialogue journals, in which students and a teacher exchange tapes, on students' speaking skill. (5) Exploring the effect of telecommunication on students' speaking skill.

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